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The Frontline Supervisor

*Helping You Manage Your Company's
Most Valuable Resource - Employees*

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◆ I supervise my employee's work, but I do not conduct her performance evaluations. We have conflicts, and with every incident she runs to the next-level manager (the one who does her evaluations). Would we have fewer conflicts if I did her performance evaluations?

Although most employees naturally accept authority in supervision relationships, if you do not conduct your employee's performance evaluation, she may not feel accountable to you. A troubled employee may take advantage of this situation, making it difficult to correct performance. Conflicts can increase if the manager at the next level (who does conduct performance evaluations) acts as an accessible arbitrator. This can cause the troubled employee to feel a safe harbor exists, reduce motivation for correcting performance, and reinforce the perception of non-accountability to the immediate supervisor. The interventions for this problem include reinforcing proper communication channels by requiring the employee to go through the supervisor first, making written performance reports of the immediate supervisor weigh heavily in evaluations, and referring the employee to the EAP as needed.

◆ My employee complains about her coworkers' tone of voice, demeanor, "rolling of eyes," sighs and huffs, and other nonverbal behavior. She says these actions are meant to harass her. Her coworkers deny these behaviors. I can't determine the truth. How do I intervene?

Your employee may be making these vague complaints for many different reasons. She could be ascribing false meanings to subtle or imagined behaviors that have nothing to do with her, or she may be unable to accurately describe truly harassing behavior. Or, perhaps this is a group of employees who are unable to resolve conflict more directly. To intervene, encourage her to self-refer to the EAP. Remember that recommending the EAP is not an indictment that she is "the problem." Rather, it is an opportunity to resolve this conflict, starting with the person willing to acknowledge and describe it. The basis of the referral is her difficulty with coworkers and admitted distress. The EAP can help her describe or document these problems so that you can deal with them. The EAP might offer her other help after an evaluation that may help her manage her responses to her coworkers.

◆ Is there a time-tested way to help employees resolve conflict — perhaps a formula or a "do it yourself" approach? If such an approach did not work, then I could make an EAP referral.

The following popular approach is designed to build empathy between two employees and motivate change. Each employee switches off, answering these questions or following the directions given: 1) What is one thing that person X does that causes you difficulty? (Each person restates the other person's answer to this question in his or her own words.) 2) What is it that you would like person X to do differently? (Each person restates the other person's answer to this question in his or her own words.) 3) Ask the two employees to work toward a written agreement. Most effective approaches to conflict resolution include an expectation by the supervisor or manager that the conflict be resolved, effective discussion between two employees that creates empathy for the other employee's position, and a commitment by both parties to an agreement and new rules that will minimize future conflict.

◆ I will be replacing the current manager of a large employee work unit. What is the basis for the confusion and disruption among employees when one manager replaces another? How can this confusion and disruption be minimized? Why is employee behavior affected?

Employees adapt to the independence and control over their work established by a manager's leadership style. Every manager is different in the amount of independence given to employees and control exerted over them in supervision. With a new supervisor, employees must readjust to a new style. This is why anxiety, conflict, and disruption can emerge. Some employees are much more resistant to adapting to change, and they may struggle to maintain the status quo by rejecting the new manager's leadership style. This can culminate in dismissals and resignations. This struggle can also undermine a new manager. Unless new supervisors are provided with support and a mandate for immediate change, they fare best by using a "go slow" approach that recognizes the natural tendency for employees to resist change.

◆ Members of our team are regularly late for meetings. I am sure this is a common problem in business and industry. Are there any creative solutions that work? I'd like to avoid getting heavy-handed.

Many techniques for increasing the effectiveness of work groups have emerged in the past century and have been applied to business and industry problems. Here is one such technique to consider that targets your problem. Make an agreement with your group members that all meetings will begin and end on time – exactly on time. Then, establish a tradition that group members who are on time always give feedback to those who arrive late by saying, "You are late." They should give this feedback without expressing any emotion or judgment. It must be given consistently at every meeting. As a supervisor, your responsibility is to ensure that this tradition is kept. Do not participate in the peer feedback. This peer-driven technique should solve the problem, as it has in many difficult group work settings.

Notes:

This information is intended only for the employees of your company. Please do not post it on a website that is accessible by the general public or by your company's clients.

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